

A step in the right direction

By Brett Davis, Media and Public Affairs Branch

The Walking Together, Working Together project developed by police in Boulia, 300km south of Mt Isa, received a highly commended in the 2004 Premier's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management.

The awards are designed to reward exceptional work by public sector units that have delivered positive results for communities throughout the state.

Boulia is an extremely isolated town of about 300 people, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents each making up about half the population.

In particular the lack of access to education (the nearest high school is 300km away), or even the awareness of what opportunities exist in the wider world, means the young people of the town are especially at risk of being seriously disadvantaged.

The initial focus of the project was on reducing the rates of truancy and juvenile crime in the town, but local police also saw the opportunity to improve the relationship between government agencies and community organisations.

The original concept for the project came from Sergeant Darren Hunt, Officer in Charge, Boulia Police Station.

He said the state of relations between police and the community was brought home during a visit he made to the primary school to give a talk, when he encountered a lot of negative feedback from the children.

By enlisting the help of other government agencies and local community groups, a plan was designed to shed light on the challenges faced by police and locals so each could gain a greater understanding of the other.

The project was conducted in two parts, with the first taking place in Boulia. Recruits from the Queensland Police Academy, Townsville flew to the town to take part in a number of activities in the local community.

This enabled the recruits to be involved in partnership policing activities and gave them exposure to conditions they would not otherwise have had.

In the second phase, schoolchildren from the town, along with parents, teachers and police, travelled to Townsville to experience a way of life very different from anything they had known before.

The children toured the Queensland Police Academy, went to a North Queensland Cowboys training session and game, visited The Strand water park and Reef HQ aquarium, went to the movies, and had barbecues and lunches on the beach.

It was the trip of their young lives when you consider Townsville is an 1,800km round trip from Boulia, and many of the children had never seen the ocean, let alone a live Cowboys game.

More importantly, it also gave the Boulia locals a greater understanding of the adjustments new residents, such as police, had to make when they came into their community.

There is now a new sense of openness and cooperation in Boulia, with better relations between police and community groups, and a much greater willingness on the part of the children to approach and interact with officers. Truancy rates and juvenile crime have also fallen significantly.

Sergeant Hunt said greater involvement with the local people had made the job of police much easier.

"Things are about a thousand times better now, and we have been able to improve the way we deliver services to the people of the community," he said.

Perhaps best of all, the children of Boulia now realise the world is a much bigger place; full of opportunities they might never before have dreamed existed.